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Democracy through technocracy? Reflections on technocratic assumptions in EU democracy promotion discourse

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*Abstract*

For some time the notion ‘technocracy’ has been, for better or for worse, associated with the functioning of the European Union (EU). But what role do technocratic assumptions play in the EU’s new ‘symbolic’ policy agenda of democracy promotion, if any? Some authors have suggested that ‘depoliticising’ technocratic biases exist in the EU democracy promotion framework, despite its ‘normative’ rhetoric and seemingly far-reaching ‘political’ consequences for target countries. This article investigates the ways in which technocratic assumptions characterise the EU’s democracy promotion discourse. Further, it reflects on the potential consequences of technocratic assumptions for EU democracy promotion: both the pragmatic benefits involved in ‘fudging’ the question of politics and ideology in democracy promotion, and the problems and paradoxes that technocratic biases give rise to by removing clear normative and political justifications from the EU democracy promotion agenda.

*Introduction*
Democracy is now ‘a universal value’ (McFaul 2004) that sets the standards for governance in the international political environment and an expanding army of ‘democracy promoters’ have taken on the task of promulgating this value globally. The EU amongst these actors has invested a significant amount of money and organisational resources to the promotion of a democratic way of life in the sphere of the accession countries as well as in ‘neighbouring’ and other ‘third’ countries (see e.g. Youngs 2001, 2008). Although democracy promotion is but one aspect of the EU’s external policies, and in terms of financial commitments is still often flanked by security, reconstruction and development policies, it is now an important policy commitment to which the EU has tied itself – rhetorically, financially and bureaucratically.

An interesting question for many analysts of EU democracy promotion has been whether this newly-minted democracy promotion actor should be read as a soft-edged ‘benign’ democracy promoter or a self-interested actor with imperial intent? Some analysts tend to veer toward the first assessment (Schimmelfennig et al 2006), although the interest-driven (or compromised) nature of EU democracy promotion has also been noted (Hyde-Price 2008; Crawford 2008). Many have plausibly argued that the EU is a bit of both: both a meaningful normative actor and a self-interest driven actor (see e.g. Barbe and Johansson-Nogues 2008). As interesting as such assessments are it is not the aim of this paper to contribute directly to the debates over whether the EU is a ‘realist’ or a ‘normative’ foreign policy actor. This paper too revolves around the analysis of power and norms, yet it analyses them in rather a different context vis a vis the usual investigations. I am interested here in analysing the role of discourses, and specifically the role of ‘technocratic discourses’, in EU democracy promotion framework. By technocratic discourses I refer here to conceptual frameworks that seek to ‘depoliticise’, ‘harmonise’, ‘rationalise’, and ‘objectify’ the democracy promotion policy agenda and knowledge-making and management within it.

But why study the role of ‘technocratic discourse’ in EU democracy promotion? First, it is important to note that expert discourses, of which technocratic discourses make up an important part, have become an important new aspect to pay attention to in the study of
international governance generally. Because of the fragmentary and non-centred forms of governance that dominate the global scene, the role of expert dialogue, and technocratic assumptions within it, has become pronounced. Understanding the ways in which civil service, technical or NGO elites and their discourses function, how their interactions are facilitated by particular linguistic and conceptual tropes, is crucial for understanding how power relations function in the current world order.

Second, it is particularly interesting to analyse technocratic assumptions within EU policies, for this is an organisation which has perhaps more than any other faced accusations on account of the role of technocratic functions and expertise in its workings (Harcourt and Radaelli 1999, p. 107). Yet, such accusations are often poorly conceptualised or backed up with evidence (see e.g. Harcourt and Radaelli 1999, Radaelli 1999). Also, it is important to note that the EU has tried to grapple with such accusations by explicitly moving in the direction of openly political and normative policy agendas (Boswell 2006). Of such agendas, democracy promotion policy of the EU is an important example. It is a policy agenda that casts the EU in the role of a ‘normative power’ in world politics, envisioning it as a facilitator of universal values of democracy and human rights, and as an enhancer of dialogue and partnership between democratic and democratising states. But more could be done to understand the unique history and role of technocratic discourses in the EU’s brand of democracy promotion. A number of general references have been made in the literature on EU foreign policy to the role that technocratic and depoliticising discourses play in EU democracy promotion, specifically in its accession and neighbourhood policies (Pridham 2005, Raik 2004, Santiso 2004). Yet, the role and consequences of ‘technocratic’ discourses have rarely been investigated in any focused way, nor have their precise impacts on the workings of EU democracy promotion and its power dynamics.

There is yet a further reason to investigate in detail the role of technocracy in democracy promotion. Democracy promotion is a policy area within which technocratic forms of discourse would seem to be, at least at first glance, particularly inappropriate. This is because of the nature of democracy as a concept. Democracy is a normative and political
concept and as such also deeply politically and normatively contested. There is no singular meaning to the concept of democracy and different definitions or models of democracy – from liberal democracy, to social democracy, to participatory democracy, to cosmopolitan democracy – are made reference to by different political actors, reflecting different value- and interest orientations (Kurki 2010). It follows that democracy promotion, informed by specific conceptual choices about what kind of democracy to promote, is a deeply political and normative project with deep consequences for how societies are organised. Depoliticising, or ‘technocratic’ discourses, would seem to be counter-intuitive in the promotion of such a deeply political and ideological policy agenda.  

In this paper I try to do take some preliminary steps towards clarifying how technocratic discourses shape EU democracy promotion discourse. The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, I set up an analytical framework for the study of technocratic discourse in the EU context. This framework draws on the definition of technocracy provided by Frank Fischer (1990), and also takes into account some key interventions by Claudio Radaelli (1999). In the second section I try to gain some sense of whether, and what kind of, expert discourses are at work in the EU’s democracy promotion discourse. I focus on answering five sets of questions relating to five different aspects of ‘technocratic discourse’ identified in section one. The analysis is based on a discursive analysis of four key EU documents on democracy promotion. It is argued here that technocratic assumptions and discourses do work within the EU democracy promotion framework, although they are by no means all-pervasive. In the final section, I seek to reflect analytically on the potential reasons for the existence of technocratic discourses in EU democracy promotion, as well as the conceptual paradoxes and problems raised by them.

**Technocracy and politics of expertise**

Increasing attention has been paid in academia to the study of expert knowledge and expert discourses in recent years. In fact, it has become something of a vogue to study
how knowledge-making by elites and expert groups function in the ‘governance’ of our societies. Arguably, a key impetus for such studies has been provided by Max Weber’s (1947) work on bureaucratic society as well as Frankfurt School critical theorists’ (see e.g. Marcuse, 1964) work on the rise of bureaucratic and technocratic forms of governance in modern post-industrial societies. Following these analysts, many commentators on technocracy have approached the subject with a sceptical and pessimistic attitude: the political consequences of technocratic forms of government have often been frowned upon as anti-democratic and disempowering for mass publics. Yet, it should not be forgotten that over the centuries there have also been many enthusiasts for technocratic forms of governance. As Frank Fischer (1990), for example, has shown, technocratic thought has a long lineage. Technocratic forms of governance have been advocated from Plato, Francis Bacon, and St. Simon onwards to Veblen, Taylor and the American Progressivists. These technocracy-enthusiasts, many of them social progressives, explicitly argued for the institution of technocratic utopias in society so that ‘we see science banishing waste, unemployment, hunger and insecurity of income forever…and we see functional competence displacing grotesque and wasteful incompetence, facts displacing disorder, industrial planning displacing industrial chaos’ (Howard Scott, leader of US movement ‘Technocrats’, quoted in Radaelli 1999, p. 18).

The rise of technocratic agendas have had important consequences for democratic polities, however. A fractious coalition of forces has been forged between political elites, democratic publics and technocratic experts during the 20th century (Radaelli 1999, p. 23). While democratic polities have been on the rise, and have aimed to subject public decisions to democratic control – primarily through the route of representational liberal democracy – technocratic elites in charge of technical information and instrumental decision-making capacity have been hostile to over-stretched democratic control of public policy. Democratic control not only risks the un-informed meddling with matters of which the general public know little, but also reduces the efficiency of decision-making and creates lags and delays in implementation of decisions. The crucial question then for democratic polities remains: how can democratic politics control technocratic
forces? It is an interesting question not just in national contexts but also in relation to international organisations, perhaps most notably the EU.

Indeed, the EU is commonly perceived as a technocratic organisation *par excellence*. This is partly because it functions, and has functioned from the start (the Monnet plan), through elite and expert control over distinct technical policy areas. The functionalist EU integration vision did not rely on mass publics in different countries coming together, nor on grand normative ideals: the EU integration plan constituted a ‘depoliticised’ ‘rational’ expert vision for a more peaceful Europe (Radaelli 1999, p. 31). The EU’s technocratic origins have had obvious consequences for democratic legitimacy within it. In recent years the EU has taken decisive steps to address the democratic deficit at its core, emphasising the power of the Council and the European Parliament in decision-making and oversight. Yet, still, the accusations that the EU is a technocratic institution have not receded. Indeed, the EU is still recognised by a majority of analysts to be a ‘regulatory power’ within which power is exercised in large degree by a selection of bureaucrats or experts in the Commission and other executive agencies (Majone 1996). But is the EU a ‘technocracy’ and what is it that technocracy specifically refers to? This is a crucial question to delve into in some detail, for the concept of technocracy is often used in very broad and unspecific ways.

*Defining technocracy*

Technocracy has been described by Frank Fischer (1990, p. 17) as ‘a system of governance in which technically trained experts rule by virtue of their specialized knowledge and position in dominant political and economic institutions’. This is a useful definition in so far as it emphasises that technocracy is tied closely to the notion that experts with specialised knowledge are the key reference point in decision-making and public policy implementation. However, this is also a rather broad definition, for it says little about what is specific about the nature of technocratic governance besides the role of elites. Perhaps more problematically, however, it seems to set out technocracy as a
I contend here that technocracy in contemporary politics should be analysed, not as a distinct ‘form of government’, but rather as a set of discursive ideals within formally ‘democratic’ (or indeed authoritarian) forms of government.

But what kind of discursive assumptions would constitute core assumptions of a technocratic ideal? Frank Fischer’s seminal work on technocracy, despite not openly opting for a discursive approach, provides a useful guide in setting out some core attributes of what could be considered a ‘technocratic’ discourse. These are (adapted from Fischer 1990, pp. 17-22, 35, 40-42):

1) Depoliticisation. Technocratic modes of governance or thought involve the advocacy of technical solutions to political problems and fear of ‘political’ solutions and debate. They entail also the prioritisation of ‘rational’ and ‘efficient’ decision-making/policy implementation over protracted normative debates, and a rejection of normative value-based level of debate in favour of practical and programmatic level of debate.

2) Ideal of social harmony. Technocratic modes of thought prioritise the ideal of social harmony and mutual interest. They are reluctant to explore the conflictual interests or aspects in society or policy areas.

3) Prioritisation of the role of rational technical experts and rationalistic or ‘economistic’ aims. Technocratic governance seeks to move political and social decisions to the realm of administrative control defined in technical terms and seeks to use instrumental technical criteria to measure political substance or meaning. Emphasis is on rational solutions, efficiency and cost-effectiveness, and hence ‘economistic’ solutions to social and policy problems. This also entails emphasis on constant monitoring of effects and costs of policy solutions.

4) Positivist objective knowledge. Emphasis is on knowledge and expert knowledge as crucial to decision-making and in feeding right knowledge and learning to the
public and political decision-makers. The type of knowledge emphasised is positivistic in nature. Technocrats envisage a rationalistic world view with precision, measurements and clearly defined and functioning ‘systems’. Emphasis is also on problem-solving, instrumental knowledge.

5) *Minimal democracy.* There is an aversion to openness and open-endedness of democratic politics: it makes decision-making messy and inefficient. While nowadays democracy is a key context accepted by many technocrats, its meaning tends to be interpreted in a minimal (procedural) sense, and policies are still sought legitimisation through reference to other policy frameworks (policy imitation) rather than any direct reference to democratic publics.

These characteristics give us a clearer sense of what technocracy refers to: it is a discursive set of ideals for governance, which emphasise the virtues of depoliticisation, harmonisation, rationalisation, and objectification of policy-making and evaluation, and which promotes the role of technical experts in policy-making over substantively ‘political’ or ‘democratic’ public actors. It should be noted here that technocracy, crucially, is not a form of governance that is defined by its content, the substance of decisions made, but rather by the mode of deciding or knowing that is applied to public affairs.

While these discursive ideals provide us with a fairly clear set of understandings of technocracy, we must make a further clarificatory point. First, as Claudio Radaelli’s work (1999) has set out, politics of expertise are not necessarily ‘technocratic’. While technocratic ideals may be dominant in some policy areas, Radaelli reminds us that explicitly political and normative dynamics can be played out in bureaucratic politics within organisations. Radaelli also notes the role of ‘epistemic communities’ in expert settings: he argues that not only technocratic discourses but also more openly normative knowledge communities can exist within expert elites within the EU (1999, p. 40; see also Haas 1992, Adler and Haas 1992). EU’s policy agendas then, even when elite-driven and bureaucratic are not necessarily technocratic (Radaelli 1999).
Second, we should also note that technocratic discourses, while seemingly non-political and non-normative are not of course necessarily so. In fact, what makes technocratic discourses interesting is that they can hide particular kinds of normative leaning or politics deep within them. The politics of technocracy of course can be multiple, however: as Fischer argues (1990), they can lean to the left or the right.

**Brief comment on methodological orientations**

To guide the empirical analysis of ‘discursive’ technocratic assumptions in the EU, I employ, unsurprisingly, a discourse analytical method. In so doing, I refer here loosely to the discourse analysis approach of Norman Fairclough (1989, 1995), notably his vocabulary analysis which places emphasis on tracing the role of specific assumptions and concepts related to them; I trace here concepts and assumptions linked to the technocratic ideals of depolitisation, harmonisation, rationality/efficiency and objectivity. Importantly, I do so within the general orientation of Fairclough’s work, which emphasises the social and political consequentiality and context of discursive assumptions. Three notable features characterise Fairclough’s approach to discourse.

First, the Faircloughian approach emphasises the social nature of language. Concepts used and linguistic structures utilised are not socially insignificant or innocent. This is an interesting approach to consider in analysing technocracy for, arguably, it points us to consider technocratic language not simply as an innocent or pragmatic language choice but rather as a social practice which reflects and reproduces structures of social relationships between actors involved in the discourse and affected by it. Second, Fairclough points out that conceptual decisions are often tied up with reproduction (even if unconscious) of power relations between actors, that they are not politically neutral. Fairclough also points us towards a holistic analysis of discourse, which mixes together analysis of specific conceptual structures with a wider interpretative and explanatory framework aimed at capturing why and how specific conceptual or linguistic forms are produced in specific context. With these orientations in mind, the analysis here consists

9
not only of a discursive reading of documents, but also of a speculative analysis of the functions as well as paradoxes of the conceptual dynamics identified (in the final section).

Yet, the approach here also has important limitations which need to be recognised. First, I must note that this is a limited form of vocabulary analysis. I do not here conduct a full Faircloughian grammatical and syntactical analysis. Also, I do not here record technocracy in action, but rather simply technocracy as a set of guiding assumptions conditioning practitioners guided by policy documents. This means that the analysis here is limited in scope. Yet, I argue that it is interesting to note the trends exemplified in the guiding documents in order to understand the argumentative conditions for the practice of democracy promotion in the EU discourse.

As for the specific targets of analysis, the emphasis here is on discourse analysis of a selection of EU democracy promotion policy documents. From the list of core EU documents on democracy promotion, I choose here four documents as the basis of the analysis. First, I analyse the European Commission ‘The European Union: Furthering Human Rights and Democracy Across the Globe’ brochure (European Commission (EC) 2007), which sets out the core aims and methods of human rights and democracy promotion of the EU. This paper is targeted for an external public audience. I choose also three primarily internally-targeted documents: three of the key strategy papers that guide policy-making in relation to the EU’s core democracy promotion instruments. The second document analysed here is the Commission’s communication on the ‘European Neighbourhood Policy: Strategy Paper’ (European Commission (EC) 2004b); the third is the Commissions ‘Programming Guide for Strategy Papers in the Programming Fiche Democracy and Human Rights (European Commission (EC) 2008); and the fourth, the DG External Relation’s Strategy paper on the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (European Commission (EC) 2006a), setting out the aims and foci for 2007-2010 period. These documents provide an interesting range of sources in that they touch upon core aspects of EU democracy promotion – the neighbourhood policy and the EIDHR – and reflect language targeted at different audiences. They do not, however,
provide an all-embracing view of EU democracy promotion discourse – not only because the documents are few but because the Council and European Parliament are not represented. Yet, I contend that they do provide an interesting cross-section of the Commission’s discourse on democracy promotion across different ‘faces’ of EU democracy promotion.

**Technocracy in democracy promotion discourses of the EU**

Various analysts of EU democracy promotion have pointed to the technocratic tendencies at play in this policy agenda. Such accusations have been made especially in relation to the EU’s accession policy and the criteria of conditionality that were enforced through it. Kristi Raik (2004), for example, has accused the EU of applying a depoliticising approach to accession process in the Baltic states. Geoffrey Pridham (2005) and Dimitry Kochenov (2007) too have pointed to the depoliticising discourse of ‘democracy’ in the accession process. Similar tendencies have been suggested in relation to the EU’s recent neighbourhood policies. Santiso (2003) for example identifies a technocratic bias in recent reforms in this policy area, while Crawford (2002) attacks the technocratic bias in the management and evaluation of democracy promotion projects. Yet, how exactly do technocratic ideals reveal themselves, if they do, in EU democracy promotion discourse? What might a discursive analysis of EU democracy promotion documents reveal?

Below I analyse the EU democracy promotion discourse by seeking answers to five sets of questions, which draw on the five technocratic assumptions identified earlier.

1) Is democracy promotion perceived as a normative or a technical policy agenda? Is the policy area ‘depoliticised’ and if so how?

2) To what extent are assumptions of social harmony and mutual interest embedded in the discourse? Is the contestability of the idea of democracy, for example, recognised?
3) What is the role of rational expertise in democracy promotion? What is the role of rational, efficiency-centred and ‘economistic’ assumptions in the policy process?

4) What is the role of ‘objective’ knowledge claims in the EU democracy promotion framework? Is there an attempt to elevate positivist frameworks for generating knowledge about democracy promotion?

5) What is the role of democratic processes or publics in the EU democracy promotion discourse and its legitimation?

1) A normative or a depoliticised policy agenda?

Is democracy promotion treated as a normative agenda or are there depoliticising aspects to the discourse on democracy promotion? The picture that emerges from the analysis of ‘depoliticising’ tendencies in the vocabulary uses in EU democracy promotion is rather complex. At first glance, the general tone of the democracy promotion discourse expressed in the documents strikes the reader as highly normative and political in nature. Liberal democracy and human rights are identified as core values in the contemporary world, and their defence is seen as an important political as well as moral imperative: they are ‘to be considered universal values, inextricably linked and to be pursued in their own right’ (EC 2006a, p. 3). ‘All of us’, as Commissioner of External Relations Benita Ferrero-Waldner reminds us, ‘have a responsibility to promote and protect the rights of our fellow members of the human family, be that at home or elsewhere in the world’ (EC 2007, p. 3). These statements indicate that democracy promotion is treated as a deeply normative and politically important agenda, not just as a technical policy area. This is a symbolic and identity-defining policy agenda (in the sense that something like tax policy might not be conceived to be).
Yet, it would be an exaggeration to state that EU policy documents are free of technocratic tendencies and assumptions. Despite the general rhetoric that is used to justify democracy promotion, and especially at the level of strategy papers themselves, a depoliticising language is also evident and, arguably, undercuts the more ‘normative’ and ‘political’ logics evident in the rhetoric.

There is, first, a clear preference towards ‘programmatic’ language over ‘normative’ level of discussion and debate in the EU documents. Although general normative justifications are referred to, we can see that these references are, in fact, drawn from other policy documents, not from normative argumentation by the EU as such. Thus, even when ‘universal values’ are emphasised there is an emphasis on ‘UN instruments and policy declarations as well as other international and regional instruments’ in having specified their legitimacy. In fact, it is only ‘by virtue’ (EC 2006a, p. 3) of such declarations that EU is to consider democracy and human rights universal values (see also EC 2008, p. 4). The normative basis of the policy agenda is curiously elided by drawing of justifications from policy documents of other international organisations. Imitation of other policy agendas, for Radaelli (1999) a classically technocratic form of legitimation, is present in the discourse.

There is then a tendency to avoid, if not of value-based rhetoric, actual commitment to value-aims, value debate and value-related forms of argumentation. This is also evidenced in the lack of debate, or lack of evidence of awareness of such debate, that exists within the documents on the contestability of democracy promotion as a policy area (see section below). It can also be seen in the preference for discussing objectives, coherence of policy frameworks and management tools, over discussion of possible problems, dangers or contradictions that may be inherently manifest in promotion of democracy abroad (see especially EC 2006a, see also EC 2007).

We can also identify the avoidance of normative debate and argumentation by noting the emphasis on instrumental justifications for EU democracy promotion in the documents. It is not insignificant to note that democracy and human rights are deemed crucial values
because they are instrumental for other ends: poverty reduction, development goals, conflict resolution and fighting of terrorism (EC 2008, p. 1, EC 2007, p. 5; EC 2006a, p. 3). Interest-based and instrumental (for other policy agendas) arguments, rather than normative arguments, play a key role in justification of this agenda.

Further, detectable within the discourse is a belief in the existence of specific, if variable, ‘solutions’ to the problem of democratisation. The EU discourse is dotted with references to how, given the correct support, target countries will democratise. Little discussion is included of the political and power-ridden nature or consequences of such solutions for target states: emphasis is rather on their instrumental nature in bringing about democratisation or liberalisation of target states, aims which are interpreted as essentially apolitical and unquestionable. While democratisation is seen as an uncertain and complex policy area, clearly some technical and cultural reforms are considered possible and desirable, involving reform of electoral procedures, rule of law and encouragement of the right kind of civil society (EC 2007, p. 19); hence, the EU’s advancement of various ‘instruments’ and through them ‘objectives’ through which correct paths can be initiated in these states (EC 2007, p. 13, EC 2006a).

Also, there is an interesting depoliticising aspect to the EU discourse on democracy promotion in that, despite the normative rhetoric, a functionalist logic is still influential in EU democracy promotion discourse. Technical co-operation, whether in the sphere of finance, environment, border controls or transport policy, are seen as nice pragmatic and arguably comfortably ‘apolitical’ ways to promote democracy (EC, 2006, p. 4, EC 2004b, pp. 3-4).

In sum, while normative issues and aspects are acknowledged, there are crucial senses in which detailed and substantive normative and political debate on democracy and democracy promotion, at least in this selection of documents⁴, is avoided. It follows that emphasis is put on rationality and coherence of policy-making – on having ‘single framework with broad geographical scope, in order to ensure policy coherence, a unified
management system and common operating standards’ (EC 2006a, p. 3) – rather than on providing justifications or specific political aims for democracy promotion strategy.

2) Assumptions of harmony and contestability of democracy debates

Technocratic logics, it has been suggested, tend to put great emphasis on social harmony and the eliding of social conflict. This is an interesting aspect to study, for democratisation is potentially a very divisive matter indeed. Not only is democracy promotion a contested notion, but also models of democracy that are set out as ideals for democracy promotion can be deeply contested between different political actors (Kurki 2010, Hobson and Kurki forthcoming). Indeed, as we see, the treatment of the issue of democracy’s contestability is an extremely interesting one in the EU documents. Again, analysis of discursive appearances of harmony or related notions does not provide direct support for presence of all-pervasive technocratic logics in the policy area, yet it demonstrates tendencies towards assumption of interest harmonisation as well as towards fudging the debate that involves around the contested concept of democracy.

Now, it is important to note that none of the documents make note of the contested nature of democracy promotion itself. As much as the controversial nature of the policy agenda is recognised it comes through in EIDHR Strategy paper’s acceptance that not all target states governments will be happy with democracy promotion, hence the importance of being able to approach civil society organisations directly rather than having to rely on government agreement (EC 2006a, p. 2, EC 2007, p. 15). Besides this important acknowledgment, democratisation and democracy promotion are seen as fairly generally accepted policy agendas, even if the process of democratisation itself is recognised to be uncertain and open-ended.

Indeed, arguably, the documents demonstrate that there is a general expectation that everyone’s interests will be served by democracy promotion. The Europeans will benefit in terms of peace and prosperity being advanced and target publics will too: both
politically in gaining greater say and liberty in their societies, but also, it is assumed, economically, as their democratisation will allow them to relate more closely to the EU. Democracy promotion, and democratisation, then, is based on ‘mutual commitment to common values’ (EC 2004b, p. 3) and serves ‘shared objectives’ (EC 2004b, p. 5). It will be mutually beneficial as (in the case of ENP) it will ‘bring enormous gains to all involved in terms of increased stability, security and well being’ (EC 2004b, pp. 5, 9).

But do the documents recognise the contestability of the notion of democracy, the fact that deep political divisions can exist between actors with regard to the kind of democracy they may wish to see in their home countries? Given the general assumption that democracy promotion brings benefits to everyone, it is perhaps somewhat surprising that a few of the documents do make reference to the contestability and contextuality of conceptions of democracy. Perhaps most detailed treatment of this can be found in the Programming Guide, which recognises in its Annex I that ‘democracy is a contested concept. Different definitions and theories emphasize different aspects of democracy’. Recognition of this point comes through also, albeit in a somewhat muted form, in the way in which local ownership and civil society support is emphasised. The EIDHR, for example, it is argued, is an instrument which recognises the variability of possible systems of democracy and recognises the need to encourage local notions on the ground (EC 2006a, p. 4). The ENP process also emphasises partnership, and hence the listening of the views of local actors, which may not correspond to the EU’s notions (EC 2004b, p. 3). These are important moments of recognition of the contestation that can take place between actors, even actors that accept democracy as an ideal.

Yet, despite this emphasis on recognition of contestability and room for political conflict between actors over the meaning and purpose of democracy and democratisation, the documents also demonstrate a very curious return to ‘harmonious’ treatment of debates on the meaning of democracy. Indeed, despite rhetorical recognition of contestability, the documents seem to work on the basis of particular assumptions about what constitute the core aspects of ‘democracy’. The values that are ‘shared’ and provide the key to democracy support are seen to be by and large in line with a generically liberal
democratic conceptions of democracy. Democracy is seen as something involving regular elections, rule of law and active civil society participation by a pluralistic and liberal set of actors that challenge the state. Indeed, a liberal background discourse still seems to dominate in the treatment of democracy in the EU (see also Pridham 2005, Pace 2009), or at least it is not directly contradicted by advocacy of any consistent alternative model. It follows that despite the fact that a semblance of contestation is recognised, the EU discourse reverts back to a fairly uniform, European, essentially although vaguely, liberal democratic notion of democracy. Despite occasional mention of social democratic and participatory ideals, no concerted effort is made to think through alternative models of democracy, nor, importantly, are other conceptions of democracy – socialist, radical democratic, let alone Islamic – entertained as the basis for the discourse.

3) **Elevation of rational expertise, efficiency considerations and economistic concerns**

The European Union is at its base an economic organisation and rationality and efficiency of co-operation was a key justification for the Union, political justifications having emerged much later on. But what is the role of rational expertise, efficiency and economistic justifications now in the context of the democracy promotion policy area?

It appears at first glance is that these ideals play a very small role in the EU discourse on democracy promotion. The language used in documents is not openly revering of experts, rationality or efficiency, nor is the overt aim of democracy promotion to advance rationalistic economistic agendas, even if some instrumental political aims are cited (see above). Instead, the tone of the language used emphasises moral rights, need for participation, and reform of political culture. Arguably, democracy promotion is exemplary of a policy area which has moved, at least rhetorically, away from the rationalistic modes of operandi. This may be reflective of the general move within the EU in recent years towards more ‘political’ or ‘symbolic’, and hence rhetorically more evocative policy agendas (Boswell 2008).
Yet, if we dig deeper we can see that the role of rationality and efficiency are not as absent from this agenda as they might appear to be at first glance. There is, first of all, an emphasis on elevation of EU expertise in the shaping of the agenda. It is EU experts that direct the EU’s democracy promotion agenda. It is their calls for papers and strategy documents which structure the policy agenda, and it is them that call others for ‘consultation’, rather than the other way around (EC 2008, p. 4; EC 2006a, p. 3; see also Crawford 2002).

Also, there is a notable emphasis on ensuring rationality, coherence and efficiency in the programmatic management of this policy agenda (EC 2006a, p. 5; EC 2004b, p. 6). It follows that setting out clear-cut objectives is crucial and great emphasis is placed on consistency of action by member states and EU institutions (EC 2004b, p. 6). This is despite the fact that, at least rhetorically, there has been a recognition of the potential for great differences in the kinds of democracy that target states may want and, indeed, in the kinds of solutions to democratisation that may have to be advanced.

Further, ‘performance indicators’ are important in devising the practical implementation of democracy and human rights promotion. Different specific objectives are set out, under which specific sets of projects will be funded (EC 2006a). As for the selection of projects, these ‘will be selected in the light of their expected results and likely effectiveness’, measured by a set of exemplary criteria provided (EC 2006a, p. 15). This is despite the fact that it is recognised that projects can have unanticipated results and that impacts can be difficult to measure. The classical emphasis on rationality and efficiency then do play a role. The emphasis, of strategy documents especially, is not just on sound but also efficient use of monetary resources allocated: efficient and rational use of money to obtain clear cut policy changes in target countries. This is linked to the need to verify the financial integrity of the funded projects, despite the obvious problems this creates in not being able to fund actors without adequate financial structures and auditing facilities.
In this context we should also note the wider ideological framing of the economistic and rationalistic assumptions. Despite the ‘political’ focus of democracy promotion, arguably some of the papers argue for a liberal capitalist open market system as the most rational and efficient context for democratisation (EC 2007; EC 2004b). Democracy promotion, even though it may seem so at times, is not an agenda always far removed from broader economic agendas of the EU, which, interestingly, tend to be geared around facilitation of market access and liberalisation of economic structures of neighbourhood and third countries.

4) **Objectivity of knowledge produced**

In democratic theory it is frequently emphasised that democracy’s contestability arises from the fact that the concept’s meaning is defined in very different value and knowledge systems. The emphasis has then been on the importance of recognising epistemic pluralism as a key context for debates on this contested concept. But how does this insight fit into analysis of the EU’s democracy promotion? Does EU’s discourse recognise core aspects of an epistemically pluralist approach to knowledge-making or does it veer towards objectivist notions?

There are three senses in which epistemological issues and plurality of perspectives seem to be taken into account. First, in EU democracy promotion policy there has been an increasing emphasis on the role of context in shaping democratisation, and hence also on listening to the specific knowledge produced about democratisation in local contexts. Democracy promoters must be context-sensitive, and this means being sensitive to the different kinds of knowledge claims that may be generated about democracy and democratisation in different regional contexts. Furthermore, as Programming Guide to Strategy Papers suggests, EU experts when devising policies in relation to specific countries, should take into account a plurality of different sources: from reports of NGOs and inter-governmental actors to media reports, academics, members of political parties and dissidents (EC 2008, p. 2). Also, interestingly, many of the papers put an emphasis
on political dialogue and partnership as away of approaching democracy promotion: instead of relying merely on EU actors dictating to neighbourhood countries, for example, there is a recognition for dialogue and ‘exchange of information’ and ‘values’ with regard to democratic reforms (EC 2004b). ENP evaluation too it is noted brings together representatives of partner countries, member states, the EC and the Council and is based on the principle of ‘joint ownership’ (EC 2004b, p. 10).

Yet, arguably, such recognition of context-specificity of democratic experiences only goes so far. The EU as a bureaucratic actor also has an interest in production of objective knowledge, and indeed proceeds, despite the recognition of various resources, to assume that a singular objective picture can be drawn from these resources for the purposes of devising appropriate democratisation policies. Indeed, such knowledge serves the purpose of identifying ‘key risks’ faced by democratisation, and ways of dealing with them. Indeed, ‘on the basis of he identification of the key processes, the weaknesses and the risks, the response strategy should identify corresponding specific interventions’ to deal with these risks (EC 2008, p. 3). In such process, local civil society actors should be consulted, especially groups funded by the EIDHR (!) (EC 2008, p. 4). Yet, the views that are expressed make up an EU (or Commission) view with regard to specific regions on the basis of which action is taken. There is then an emphasis on EU process/institutions, especially the Commission, acting as a knowledge centre, which filters information provided by others into a singular knowledge framework providing the most objective view of the field. This is perhaps most notable in the ENP document for the Action Plans within which the Commission had a central role in the process through its evaluations and reports on the accession states. Despite ‘joint ownership’ of the monitoring of partnership agreements, it is the Commission which draws up periodic reports on progress (EC 2004b, p. 10).

Another sense in which objective knowledge making comes through is in the assessments of the impact of interventions. The strategy papers especially make it clear that democracy assistance needs to be monitored throughout. There need to be clear ways of distinguishing how and why money has been spent and how this money has contributed
towards the objectives identified. Hence, EIDHR strategy paper, for example, devotes most of its detail to how to identify specific measures for the different objectives identified. All policies and support structures need to have specific ‘expected results’ and ‘performance indicators’, which are used to assess their success, and what these might be are set out for all the individual objectives of funding. It is important of course that such performance indicators can be objectively measured, and indeed the assumption in the strategy paper for the EIDHR is that they can. Identifiable objective events or actions can be interpreted as signs of success or failure.

Yet, very interestingly, this document also recognises the problems of delivering impact, if not of objective impact assessment. It is stated that the ‘public image of EIDHR interventions is just as important as the actual achievements’ (EC 2006a, p. 15), implying that objective results demonstrated on the ground may be less important than symbolic importance of this policy area for the EU as an actor. Yet, this symbolic importance, also, can be measured: by ‘the degree of public knowledge about EU action in favour of human rights [and democracy]’ (EC 2006a, p. 15).

The objective standards for reporting and knowledge transfer have come under criticism for focusing on managerial aspects of EU policy process (Crawford 2002). Tendencies in this direction can certainly be identified in these documents: focus especially of strategy papers is on managing the process of democracy funding in a clear cut and objective manner. An assumption is that objective knowledge can be had, and that this plays an important role in shaping and monitoring EU democracy promotion policies.

5) Democratic legitimation

How are the policies and policy frameworks justified? Are democratic forms of legitimacy appealed to? It seems that the forms of legitimacy appealed to are closer to technocratic than democratic kinds.
First, as was noted before there is a tendency to appeal to policy documents of other organisations as the basis of legitimation of the democratisation policy agenda in the EU. While multiple references are made to the importance of this policy area, these are made primarily in reference to other international organisations’ policy frameworks, not in relation to EU’s specific political role, specific political leaders, or EU publics’ insistence on democracy promotion. A key mode of ‘technocratic legitimacy’ then is evident in this policy area: that of mimetic imitation of other policy frameworks, whether from UN context or from other EU contexts.

Another aspect in which we can see the role of technocratic legitimation is in how consultations are discussed. While there is an emphasis in the policy documents on the importance of consultation, and on justifying the shape of EU policies in relation to the consultations that have taken place (EC 2008, p. 4, EC 2006a, p. 3), the focus is arguably on consultation of other expert actors deemed relevant for the policy area. It is mentioned that in EIDHR strategy review member states and other Commission DGs have been consulted, as have, importantly, some key civil society organisations, specific ‘Brussels-based NGOs’ (EC 2006a, p. 3). Yet, arguably, these all constitute groups of experts, rather than ‘publics’ or ‘political’ actors, and thus the nature of the legitimacy conferred to EU policy from these consultations is, arguably, closer to a technocratic form of legitimacy than ‘democratic’ legitimacy, certainly of any direct democratic kind.

On the basis of the brief analysis of the documents in question, it seems that ‘democratic’ forms of legitimation get a rather short shrift in EU democracy promotion policy process. True, the views of democratic EU publics on democracy promotion are not insignificant, as indeed EIDHR’s Strategy paper’s reference to the impact of EIDHR symbolically demonstrate, yet they are something to be affected by the democracy promotion policies, not something that have been acknowledged to affect or legitimise the policy area itself. Also, the European Parliament, the most directly democratically representative body in the EU, interestingly, is hardly mentioned in these Commission documents.
Some analytical reflections on the functions and paradoxes of technocracy in democracy promotion discourse

A complex picture emerges of the role of technocratic assumptions in EU democracy promotion. It is true that there are elements of a depoliticised approach evident in the policy discourse, yet there are also some clearly normative and political aspects to the discourse. There is a tendency to assume harmony of interests and shared objectives in democratisation, yet there is also some, if rather muted, recognition of contestability of democracy as a notion. Furthermore, there are rationalistic and economistic discourses at play, although they are not all-pervasive. There is some recognition of the importance of pluralistic sources of knowledge in the discourse, yet there is also a preference for objectivist type of knowledge-production. There are attempts to legitimise the policy agenda, but these tend to return to technocratic resources of legitimation.

What does the mixed picture identified above mean for our understanding of EU democracy promotion and its modes of operation? Let me start by analysing some of the pragmatic and functional benefits of the technocratic notions in EU discourse on democracy promotion, before moving on to analyse some of the more problematic and paradoxical consequences such assumptions may have in shaping the EU democracy promotion.

Beneficial functions of technocratic discourses

It could be argued that there is a pragmatic role for technocratic discourses in EU democracy promotion. First, it is important for bureaucratically controlled and publically funded organisations to ensure the efficient use of resources and measurement of effects of policies funded. Objectivist discourses with regard to knowledge and rationalist and efficiency-centred assumptions regarding use of financial resources are surely desirable in enabling effective oversight over public finances in the EU.
This is not all, however, for in the case of the EU there are further pragmatic considerations attached to technocratic assumptions. Democracy promotion and debates surrounding the concept of democracy in general, are contested in nature. This creates deep challenges for all policy actors, but especially for ones that are characterised by structural complexity and ideological and political pluralism. It would be strange for the EU to act, as the US for example claims to do, as an advocate of a very specific ideological orientation with regard to democracy: this militates against the acceptance of ideological diversity within this broadly liberal, but nevertheless politically pluralistic, international organisation.

The EU has, it could be argued, dealt with the need to compromise its democracy promotion policy with its background and the need to ‘fudge’ the issue of ideological orientation in an ingenious manner. The EU has set out, first, on the high level of political rhetoric, a uniquely broad and unspecific set of political aims and criteria for democracy promotion. Thus, in the generic Copenhagen criteria, in the ENP and in the EIDHR policy framings a vaguely defined liberal democratic notion of democracy is advanced (Pridham 2005, Kurki 2009, Pace 2009, Smith 2008). This vague rhetoric, however, has crucially been advanced hand in hand with a technocratically-minded discourse, which further facilitates the depoliticisation and fudging of the issue of ‘ideology’ in democracy promotion. Indeed, while seemingly precise and implementation oriented the technocratic discourse is functional to avoiding deep questions related to the kind of political or ideological project the EU advances through its democracy promotion. Indeed, in the absence of a clear-cut normative and political ideology on democracy, technocratic ideals have come to if you like fill the gaps that are left in EU democracy promotion rhetoric. Bureaucratic and expert actors in the Commission are forced to provide some specificity to the idea of democracy and they do so through their technocratic language, while simultaneously fudging and depoliticising what the EU precisely stands for in its democracy promotion (see also Kochenov 2007).
It is important then to note the positive aspects of technocratic discourses in EU policy. As Radaelli (1999) has argued, technocratisation of policy has been a major instrument of success for the EU in many policy areas. In democracy promotion too technocratic assumptions seem to play an important functional role: they allow deeply contested debates with regard to ‘which democracy’ and ‘whose democracy’ to be sidestepped. EU is a politically plural entity and as such it would be expected that, through it, various different kinds of democracy would be promoted. The de-politicisation of the practice of democracy promotion facilitates avoidance of the kind of political conflict and confusion on the ‘aims’ and ‘identity’ of the EU.

Furthermore, it could be argued that technocratic discourses also, interestingly, facilitate a surprisingly pluralistic set of practices in relation to democracy promotion. Precisely because cracks that might exist between different approaches to defining democracy, and consequently to democracy promotion, are painted over, and the issue of democracy’s nature is fudged, the differences and contradictions that arguably exist in the practices of the EU actors on democracy promotion can be glossed over and thus the existing pluralistic practice on the ground can be maintained. Select few civil society organisations are still allowed to pursue their somewhat more radical participatory agendas, while the Commission’s Trade DG can advance a liberal (economic) agenda with rather more limited concern for participative processes, or consequences for local democratisers. The semblance of unity and common rationality at the centre of Commission democracy promotion provides a way of by-passing deep level political and normative debate between actors in the EU.

Yet, despite the positive aspects of EU’s technocratic discourse, it also plays some more problematic and paradoxical roles.

*Power relations of technocratic discourse?*
Fairclough (1989, p. 41) argues that despite the fact that power aspects of discourse are often hidden and implicit: ‘in discourse people can be legitimizing (or delegitimizing) particular power relations’. If we are to take Faircloughian perspective as our starting point, we are directed to note that technocratic aspects of EU democracy promotion discourse may not be entirely innocent, pragmatic or beneficial. Let’s then pay attention to some of the ways in which power may be implicated in the technocratic discourses in EU democracy promotion. I want to suggest here that power relations may be involved in at least three ways: in constituting (hidden) ideological content of definitions of democracy (and related concepts), in setting out of relations between promoters and takers of democracy, and in defining the subjectivities of actors involved.

First, it could be argued that the depoliticising pulls in the EU discourse result in inadequate acknowledgement of the ideological nature of the actions taken in defence of democracy. The fact that a largely liberal definition of democracy is actually used as the basis for the policy is in a sense ‘hidden in plain sight’ by the ‘technocratisation’ of discourse. The fudging of the politics of democracy promotion results in an inadvertent prioritisation of liberal democratic aspects of democracy in democracy promotion. Despite rhetoric references to social justice and participatory processes, little concerted effort has taken place to take into account what advancement of holistic notions of social democracy or participatory democracy might mean (for democratic controls in structures of the economy, or workplaces, or wage level negotiations), nor to think through the full consequences of what promoting such politically very different conceptions of democracy might mean for the nature of the actors empowered on the ground or for EU’s own political ‘project’ or ‘identity’. Hence, the EU’s project in relation to external actors remains unclear. Which actors are empowered by such a notion of democracy, and which actors silenced, is reflected on in a limited fashion. Practical ‘technical’ decisions about financial structures and accountability are treated as central criteria, while ‘political’ criteria and ideological leanings of organisations are discussed marginally. Through such eliding of dealing with the full brunt of the politics of the notion of democracy, or indeed the full justifications for democracy promotion, EU’s role as an enforcer of particular kinds of power relations in target societies, as well as between societies is hidden.
Second, arguably, power relations can be implicated with regard to the kinds of relations that are envisaged between actors within and between states. The technocratic ideals embedded in the discourse may lead to the empowerment of some actors over others. Thus, it is important to note that not all actors are empowered in equal ways: hidden biases in discourse, and its depoliticisation, may hide the fact that specific kinds of actors – for example liberal entrepreneurial and pro-EU organisations within the target states are encouraged while some actors such as radical democratic or anti-European NGOs out of the vision (see e.g. Crawford 2008). In such ways, the EU discourse then structures, or conditions the structuring of, the power relations within target states.

It also structures them between groups of people beyond state borders. Not only does liberal democracy promotion open up new markets for European trade actors but also it involves interference in the political dynamics of these countries by European actors: in terms of structuring of judiciaries, parliaments and political cultures of these states to conform to the wishes and ideals set out by European ‘experts’. Such processes, however positively evaluated, entail structuring of relations of power in the target states and between the states. Indeed, through the democracy promotion discourses, the EU too promotes certain values, preferences and interests on the target states. Despite the references to partnerships and dialogue in democracy promotion, the way in which European values are understood and embedded in criteria for what is a promotable can be influential on relations of power between EU and target states. Indeed, it is by and large the target states that are ‘takers’ of EU values, which are embedded in the depoliticised, harmonised and rationalistic discourse advanced by the EU in its policy discourse.

Finally, it is interesting to note that power relations may also involved in how not just relations but identities and self-understandings of actors are shaped. Thus, through democracy promotion not only are target states identified as ‘failing’ and ‘deficient’ in important respects but also at the same time the EU’s role as a positive, and moreover, unified international actor is reinforced. Indeed, one could say that the democracy promotion discourse, despite its and through its technocratic aspects, reinforces the
subject position of EU as an actor: technocratic, if not democratic, form of legitimacy this sort of a ‘symbolic’ policy agenda (Boswell 2008) provides for the EU in terms of bolstering its own superior ‘democratic’ identity is indispensable.

*Paradoxes of technocratic discourse*

Besides these power relations that should be noted there are arguably also some curious paradoxes that technocratic discourses give rise to in EU democracy promotion.

First, it could be argued that it is something of a problem that the technocratic approach glosses over the unclear normative meaning of the idea of democracy in EU discourse. As a result, the EU remains in a limbo in which it does not, despite its advocacy of the universal value of democracy, have a clear conception of what this universal value means and why exactly it should be protected. It has programmes on the ground, but no general political theory, normative justification or ideological/political strategy for these programmes. In a sense then the EU could, indeed, be characterised as an actor that fits in David Chandler’s understanding of international governance as ‘hollow hegemony’ (Chandler 2009), where no clear political strategies and aims exist, just programmes with programmatic aims on the ground. A related paradox created by the tendencies towards technocratic discourse is that there can be a tendency to assume that EU has some sort of ‘solutions’ to offer to the problems of third countries, even though simultaneously it lacks a clearly defined, political or normative ideal or project altogether.

A further consequence of technocratic tendencies is that the emphasis tends to be elitist, if not in terms of the actors that are funded, in terms of how projects are managed (Crawford 2002, 2008) and in how stakeholders are consulted. The emphasis in directing of funding, and even in civil society consultations, is on NGOs elites, based in Europe and in possession of adequate financial and knowledge making facilities (Crawford 2002). Despite emphasis on local knowledge, dialogue and ownership, arguably, the objectivist tendencies in EU democracy promotion discourse undercut adequate
recognition of the epistemological and political pluralism that is linked to debates on what ‘democratisation’ means and how it is best measured.

A further aspect to note about technocratic assumptions in the EU democracy promotion is that they seem to hide the politics that already may exist within the organisation on democracy promotion. There seem to be contradictions and bureaucratic infighting between different ideologies and world views within and between different EU actors and bureaucratic sectors. While not a great deal can be revealed about the relations between different sectors of the EU here, we can note the slight differences of emphasis in discourses between DG RELEX and EuropeAid for example. The technocratic assumptions, arguably, hide the existence of such incipient ideological, political and normative debate, if also, in so doing, the festering ideological contradictions within the EU democracy promotion framework.

**Conclusion**

Claudio Radaelli (1999) reminds us that while expert discourses are important and influential, they need not be technocratic and can be directed towards more politicised and normative directions. Yet, this article has shown that technocratic assumptions do play a role in EU discourse on democracy promotion. The role of technocratic discourses is not over-whelming in the EU discourse on democracy promotion. Some normative rhetoric is also present as well as some recognition of contestability of democracy promotion and the existence different perspectives on processes of democratisation. Yet, the influence of technocratic assumptions is strong enough to create particular kinds of pulls in EU democracy promotion (as conducted by the Commission): pulls towards depoliticisation, assumptions of harmony, rationalistic and economistic methods, objectivist measurements and management, and technocratic rather than democratic ways of legitimising policies. The technocratic aspects of EU discourse also have the potential to create certain problematic consequences for power relations within and between EU actors and target states. They, further, arguably create certain problems and paradoxes
within EU democracy promotion. Perhaps most notably, they create a situation where EU deems itself an important advocate of a universal value – an important role for an otherwise problematically definable actor – but where this actor lacks any clear meaning or political project, or even clear normative justification for the advocacy of this policy agenda. They can also undermine the EU’s rhetorical commitment to dialogical democratisation and openness in regard to the kind of democracy that is envisaged.

Yet, these tendencies may not be entirely problematic, nor need they be permanent. First, it has been argued here that these technocratic tendencies can be described in positive terms – for they serve positive functions in the EU system, not least in enabling a highly normatively and politically contested notion to be applied as a foreign policy aim. Further, it is important to note that they are not permanent on unchangeable. While it is unlikely that technocratic notions will disappear from EU policy, or even its democracy promotion it is possible to address its paradoxical consequences.

To address these concerns and paradoxes, it is crucial to generate room for more politicised and normative discussion over democracy in EU democracy promotion, whether through injecting reflexivity into the ‘epistemic communities’ that populate the agenda or through seeking to expose the already existing political differences that exist hidden within the current democracy promotion framework. While technocratic assumptions are unlikely to disappear from EU democracy promotion framework precisely because of the important pragmatic role they play in facilitating this agenda, further politicisation of debate on democracy within the EU surely is a desirable end – and would be, as Radaelli has pointed out, a positive move towards political maturation of EU both as a democracy promoter and as a foreign policy actor in general.

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2 This is not to say that normative and technocratic are necessarily contradictory assumptions. Indeed, one of the key aspects of technocratic thought is that embedded within it are forms of normative preference. See section 1.


4 Because of their more political role, Council and EP discussions may reveal a more politicised level of discourse. Yet, indications exist that for various reasons (discussed partly in the final section) this is not necessarily the case.